

MEMO

to: UCL Estates Management Committee
from: Professor Joe Cain
re: proposal for changing name of lecture theatre

14 October 2014

Proposal

UCL undertakes to change the name of the Galton Lecture Theatre within six months.

Rationale

Sir Francis Galton was a Victorian polymath with important contributions to emerging sciences, such as statistics, meteorology, anthropometry, and fingerprinting. He researched the inheritance of intelligence as well as qualities he associated with personal and racial character. Galton's association with UCL came mostly through strong collegial links to statisticians, including Karl Pearson and Raphael Weldon. Galton also was a patron to UCL.

Galton is widely presented as the "father of eugenics". His writings were a focal point for some elements of this international political movement. Galton advocated active management of human populations and pursued policies aimed at major demographic change towards the evolutionary "improvement" of the human species. Galton understood humanity through the lens of an anthropological tradition that divided humanity into units such as races, sub-races, and sub-sub-races. He ranked these units in hierarchies of value. He promoted socioeconomic policies designed to secure the success of some races while thwarting the ambitions of others.

For the purposes of Galton's own biography, his views must be appreciated within their historical context. However, in the twenty-first century, Galton's name has been inextricably linked with racist, misogynist, and hierarchical ideologies that are abhorrent and indefensible. Some will complain such associations are imposed unfairly. Nevertheless, they are endemic. They also are corrosive.

UCL must associate itself with leaders in the struggle for equality. By any metric, Galton was not one of those leaders. Honouring Galton with a named element of the estate associates UCL, rightly or wrongly, with elements of those abhorrent ideologies. This undermines our aspirations towards leadership on equity. Whatever might have been the merits of honouring Galton in the past, the time has come to honour others, particularly those with strong associations to the equality agenda that is the moral heart of our institution.

Corollary

UCL maintains The Galton Collection as a museum resource. It is unaffected by this proposal. The collection provides an invaluable tool for reflection and critical inquiry into the history of science and the history of relations between science and society. Through it, UCL furthers its equality agenda.